

“Above is the street I walk along daily”: re-examining multimodality through an examination of the “undivided back” format of early twentieth century postcards

Julia Gillen, Lancaster University

Paper presented at Valuing the Visual in Literacy Research. Sheffield University 4-5 July 2017.



Abstract

Early twentieth century postcards were the social media platform of their day. Between 1901 and 1910 postcards were an extraordinary, even revolutionary, cultural phenomenon, in Great Britain as other countries in Europe. For the first time there was a cheap, attractive and extremely speedy way to send a message that combined an image with your own text, that would arrive within hours.

In the very first years of the twentieth century postcards were strictly regulated by the Post Office so that the whole of one side was taken up by the addressee's name and address. The other side, featuring an image, left a little space for writing alongside or around the image. This “undivided back” format was therefore similar in some respects to today's social media, combining an image with a caption. Publishers responded to the new craze by producing cards with a huge range of popular themes, such as cute cats, celebrities and landscapes. It was also possible to commission or create your own image.

This paper concerns a collection of 56 such cards approached through the sociolinguistics of writing (Lillis, 2013) and in particular her concept of “writtenness”. I extend earlier work (Gillen, 2017) by arguing that new ways of regarding multimodality can lead to a significant challenge to the well known social semiotic perspective encapsulated by Jewitt (2009, 2013) and Matthiessen (2009) in three respects:

- Move away from a sense of the sign/semiotic resource as somehow static at the point of selection to a more dynamic conception of meaning-making, founded on intersubjectivity;
- Refocus multimodality studies away from a stress on the individual actor (gestures, posture etc) to material, social processes of technologies;
- Greater emphasis on the interpretive acts of the researcher.

Combined, these shifts chime with current relational materialist perspectives (Hultman & Lenz Taguchi, 2010) in decentring human forces to better appreciate the networks of non-human forces and acts of perception by the researcher.

For further information contact Julia Gillen
j.gillen@lancaster.ac.uk

Edwardian Postcard Project on Facebook
@EVIIpc Twitter.